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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1237
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000659

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV MR

SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: OPPOSITION SLOWLY ADJUSTING TO NEW REALITIES

Classified By: CDA Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Opposition leaders continue to absorb the results of the July presidential elections with a mix of disillusionment and anger. While they struggle to maintain some of the political unity that marked opposition resistance to the coup, they are preparing to assume the role of a peaceful, albeit not loyal, opposition. They continue to challenge the validity of the elections as the product of election fraud, international manipulation, and -- sadly -- lack of public concern. End Summary

¶2. (C) Two generations of leaders: Charge met with departing rotating president of the FNDD Abdel Khaddous Abeidna and incoming president (and President of the National Assembly) Messaoud Ould Boulkheir on October 10 and 11 respectively. Ould Boulkheir, who lost to President Aziz in the July 18 elections, has assumed the rotating FNDD presidency for the next six months. This was the first meeting with Ould Boulkheir since the elections -- he has generally stayed out of town for most of this period.

Messaoud Ould Boulkheir -- a broken spirit?

¶3. (C) The generally reserved and soft-spoken President of the National Assembly seemed particularly down during his hour-long meeting with Charge. Discussing the election loss, Ould Boulkheir cited Aziz' access to government resources and active vote buying as determinant in his first round election but seemed more disappointed in the Mauritanian people themselves lamenting, "Mauritanian society is not yet ready to take democracy seriously." Ould Boulkheir confirmed that he would convene the National Assembly and function as its president -- effectively accepting the election results. Given the policy options and "since the international community abandoned us," Ould Boulkheir said the opposition had to "adjust to new realities." He welcomed news that the Mission was working to restart the USAID-funded program of NDI support to the National Assembly, but he cautioned not to expect much of his institution. While he agreed with the Charge that the parliament had played a vocal and decisive role during the political crisis of 2008-2009, he said, "but only in the negative sense. It didn't show itself as an effective balance to executive power. It only showed how easily it can be manipulated from outside." Boulkheir said he did not expect President Aziz (Comment -- Ould Boulkheir always referred to Aziz as "General," never as "President" End Comment) to call new legislative elections as long as he enjoyed a parliamentary majority. He noted, however, that

his majority lacked credibility as a parliamentary block since it consists mainly of independents "with no political agenda -- only the personal agenda of their bank accounts."

¶ 14. (C) Ould Boulkheir told Charge that he would try to run the National Assembly correctly -- not seeking to impede the government but seeking to challenge its policies and programs. He recognized the opposition lacked the votes to play an effective balance-of-power role. He had already abandoned ideas to hold hearings on the conduct of the July elections. That said, he would use the opportunity offered by budget hearings to pose difficult questions.

¶ 15. (C) Ould Boulkheir said the RFD's President Ahmed Ould Daddah, who still retains the official title of "leader of the opposition," had sought to gain control of the FNDD parliamentarians. The FNDD had rejected the idea since "he wasn't with us in the beginning, so we won't join him now." That said, Ould Boulkheir said the FNDD and RFD would continue to coordinate policies as they had in the latter period of the coup. The FNDD and RFD will field separate lists in the November 6 elections for 1/3 of the Senate (Note: These are indirect elections wherein Senators are elected by members of city councils. End Note). He noted that the Islamic Tawassoul Party that had been a member of the FNDD was now running a joint list with Aziz' UPR party -- evidence, he said, that Aziz had planted the Islamists as spies within the FNDD. Ould Boulkheir confirmed he had had no contact with former President Abdallah since the elections saying -- "I've tried to reach him in Lemden a few times, but he never returned the call."

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¶ 16. (C) Ould Boulkheir made the point of criticizing France throughout the political crisis. He said, "Despite what Sarkozy said about a new policy for Africa when he came in, the "France Afrique" lobby convinced him that France was losing influence to China and the U.S. Now we are back in the French neo-colonial practices of the past." Ould Boulkheir added, "I don't understand U.S. policy on this, you seem to be leaving the field to Paris."

Abdel Khaddous Ould Abeidna -- still in the fight, but patient

¶ 17. (C) The young Ould Abeidna told Charge "the political crisis is still underway" and cautioned the U.S. not to confuse the current quiet as a sign that tensions are not brewing below the surface. Ould Abeidna continued his previous claim that the July 18 elections were fraudulent even if there is no strong evidence -- "We know a crime took place, we just don't know how." He thought he had managed the post-election defeat process well having found a balance between those who wanted to take to the streets (the RFD call but one that the FNDD saw as against the interests of the Mauritanian people and, potentially, a route that could quickly escalate out of control) and those who were ready to join Aziz (the route taken by Tawassoul). Ould Abeidna said he had convinced the FNDD leadership it was best to be relatively quiet for the time being, "We don't have to tell the people Aziz has not carried out on his promises, that prices are rising, that there is no electricity, and that they can't control the flooding -- they know all that." Ould Abeidna said he had been careful not to allow the FNDD to be accused of relishing in Mauritanian hardship keeping his comments to a "Where's the policy?" critique of an Aziz government that has been very slow to articulate what it plans to do now that it is in power. Ould Abeidna claimed the FNDD was surprised how quickly Aziz' supporters were turning on him as it became clear he could not deliver on his promises.

¶ 18. (C) Like Ould Boulkheir, Ould Abeidna chose to complain about the French who he saw as "reasserting their colonial

rule" as a price for their support to Aziz. Ould Abeidna claimed newly appointed Ministers under the Aziz government complained "we are working for TOTAL, with Aziz asking the same question at every Council of Ministers meeting -- 'What are you doing with the French?'" Ould Abeidna claimed Aziz allows for no policy debate or initiative in his government leading ministers to say, "I sign what comes in front of me, but otherwise I shut up." (Comment: Charge has found Ould Abeidna sees conspiracy in everything -- sometimes legitimately so. End Comment).

HANKINS